

Side Brown

Rodney Crowell's new album *Life Is Messy* (Columbia) finds him moving further from country into the slick pop sound he's been developing for years. It sounds great. The production is superb and the musicianship is of the highest quality. Too bad the songs are shallow explorations of pain and self pity, combined with a phenomenal ego, delivered with a curious lack of emotion and passion.

Crowell split up with his wife, singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash this year and some of the songs allude to that, but there's no heartbreak, little anger or sense of loss.

Starting with a grand disclaimer, "It's Not For Me To Judge," Crowell runs down a list of things he obviously considers fucked up and then says, "It's not for me to judge." It's the ultimate song of non-commitment, which may not be his intention, but that's how it comes off, with silly lines like "We've got cable/But we're not able/To see the truth..."

Something approximating a mood of sadness occurs on the title track, but Crowell's lyrical weaknesses betray him relying on cliches and rhyming messy with depress me. For some unfathomable reason at the song's end he invokes Elvis and complains about fame.

The standout track, written with Rosanne Cash is "I Hardly Know How To Be Myself," the only time where lyrics, music and mood coalesce with clarity of vision.

The rest of the album alternates between rockers like "It Don't Get Better Than" and "Lovin' All Night." and attempts at poetical ballads like "Alone But Not Alone."

Crowell isn't out of ideas on *Life Is Messy*, but he doesn't know how to see them through, making the album pretty much of a mess.

(more)

2 Side Brown

Marty Stuart's new album (due out next week) *This One's Gonna Hurt You* (MCA) starts with one of those jive talking songs (that only seem to happen in C and W) about meeting Hank Williams in heaven. The only good thing about it is it leads right into a killer version of Ola Belle Reed's "High On a Mountaintop," where Stuart perfectly meshes traditional country with rock.

The rest of the album is strong, straightforward country that usually has a funky edge to it. Stuart, who started out in bluegrass and is one of Nashville's top pickers is best when he sticks to traditional stuff and also when he rocks it up a bit. Standouts include a Johnny Cash tribute "Doin' My Time" (with Johnny stopping by for a guest vocal), a Joe Ely styled rocker, "The King of Dixie," and the title track. The main problem with this album is that on every third song Stuart has to sing about how "country" he is. If he'd just play it, he'd be much better off.

Mac McAnally's been kickin' around Muscle Shoals, Alabama and Nashville for years, mostly as a songwriter, but also as a session guitarist. He just released his first album in years, *Live and Learn* (MCA). He's a far above average songwriter with a strong melodic sense and tightly crafted lyrics. However, his delivery is rather lightweight and often reminiscent of James Taylor. The result is a pleasant album of country songs that often come off sounding like new age mood music. Notable exceptions are "It's All Over Now," where he lets his R and B influences show through and "Junk Cars" where he rocks out.

Impressive in the vocal department is Neal McCoy whose second album *Where Forever Begins* (more)

3 Side Brown

Begins (Atlantic) was just released. McCoy spent seven years opening the show for Charlie Pride and he has touches of Pride's straightforward style as well as traces of Merle Haggard and Lefty Frizzell.

McCoy evidently doesn't write, so some of the songs sound like Nashville product, but for the most part McCoy stays away from commercial excess with a sound that is a lot closer to '70s country than the dreck of the early '80s or the current crop of new traditionalists.

Standouts include "Now I Pray For Rain," "Palm of My Hand," "The Wall," "There Ain't Nothin' I Don't Like About You," and "Big Doggin' Around," where McCoy keeps things crisp and tight. The ballads such as "Where Forever Begins" and "Where Daddies Go" are his weak point with overly sappy arrangements. But on the honky-tonk songs, McCoy's vocals serve as a textbook example of how country should be sung.

One of the most exciting developments in country this year is the debut album by the Miami based band, The Mavericks (MCA). This four-piece group knows what C and W is all about with excellent vocals by Raul Malo and stinging lead guitar by David Lee Holt. Malo's vocal skills come to the fore on the Buck Owens/Harlan Howard song, "Excuse Me (I Think I've Got a Heartache)" and his own ballad, "This Broken Heart." They also show they can get funky on the bluesy, "I Got You."

Malo is the son of Cuban exiles and his, "From Hell to Paradise" tells the story of his parent's flight from Cuba. His other songs such as "A Better Way," "Forever Blue" and

(more)

4 Side Brown

"Children" show a songwriter to be reckoned with.

Bands in country music are sort of weird phenomenon since the music is basically dominated by solo artists. They've either been overtly pop like Shenandoah or the Oak Ridge Boys, or middle of the road like the Desert Rose Band (who should know better), and bands who've done otherwise haven't lasted long. The Mavericks don't fall into either of the first two categories and they have the talent to break through the last.

David Olney isn't exactly country and his latest album *Roses* (Philo/Rounder) isn't exactly new, but is well worth checking out. Olney crosses country, blues and folk mixing his own songs with Townes Van Zandt's "Reckless Blues" and Robert Johnson's "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," and pulling off both.

Olney's got a streak of wild craziness in him that is immediately evident on the first track "Lee's Highway/Bamaloo." He's always bouncing back and forth between blues and country, though "Luckiest Man" is reminiscent of Randy Newman. His blues are direct descendants in feel of such '60s singers as Geoff Muldaur and Spider John Koerner.

"Millionaire" walks a fine line between blues and traditional country with a familiar sounding melody you can't quite pin down. This one song has a million influences from old-time guys like Dock Boggs to whacky folkies like Peter Stampfel and Michael Hurley.

Often funny, but also genuinely moving and sad, Olney can be witty with "Love's Been Linked to the Blues," or go right to your heart with "That's Why She's With Me."

On this album he's backed by a funky and tight acoustic ensemble featuring fiddle,
(more)

5 Side Brown

drums, mandolin, steel-bodied National, with the most well known musician Roy Huskey

Jr. on bass. Intense real, and ignoring anything remotely commercial, David Olney plays music that is very much alive.